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Local Cereal Producer Wins Grand Prize

Better techniques, new markets lead to group's success promoting fonio



Photo: USAID/Senegal/Sue Telingator

Aïssatou Ndiaye, the president and founder of the Koba Club, an all-women's business group in Kégodou, Senegal, celebrates the group's success in agricultural promotion.

"I knew the prize committee was speaking with group members, but had no idea we would win. It was a total surprise!" said Aïssatou Ndiaye, who runs a women's business group in Senegal.

Aïssatou Ndiaye received a call while in the airport in Dakar, completely unprepared for what she heard next. Her business won the Grand Prize of the President of the Republic, worth over \$50,000, for its exceptional performance in promoting local cereals.

Ndiaye (or "Aya", as she is known locally) started the Koba Club, an all-women's business group, 20 years ago. At first, the group participated in many activities, including tending a plant nursery and dyeing textiles.

But then it focused on one major product, fonio (*digitaria exilis*), thought to be Africa's oldest cereal. Largely grown and cultivated by women, fonio is labor intensive; the work involved in harvesting, winnowing, and washing 2 kilograms (about 4.5 pounds) of the small seeds can take up to three hours. Working with a group of 25 women, Aya longed to find opportunities to generate greater profits for herself and the others, all dependent on this income to feed their families.

In 2003, she heard about a new USAID initiative that helped rural producers increase their market revenues. Under this program in partnership with the Senegalese Ministry of Environment, USAID encouraged producers to use sound management practices with their resources.

Aya approached the coordinators for help, and USAID assisted the club by helping it acquire fonio processing machines and remodel its workshops in order to increase efficiency and improve hygiene and product quality. USAID also worked to stimulate national demand of fonio through a series of product demonstrations and informal partnerships with various agro-industrial enterprises.

These new markets increased demand and ensured that, instead of worrying about a surplus, the Koba Club now worried about filling all its orders. The results of the Koba Club's participation in the USAID program are immediately apparent. Over the last five years, profits increased from \$700 annually to nearly \$15,000.